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ABSTRACT

Secondary school teachers' personal relationships with students is a crucial issue. However, it is rarely the subject of research or of materials for preservice teachers, partly because of the delicacy of the subject, as well as the difficulty of the researcher's obtaining highly guarded personal information. A five-year study with 11 beginning secondary school teachers provided an opportunity to examine teachers' positive and negative feelings toward their students. During the study, it was noted that teachers were more likely to express dislike or hostility toward individual students than feelings of affection. In the fifth year of the study, teachers were asked direct questions about their feelings of attraction for certain students and about their experiences and techniques for dealing with student crushes. Teachers mentioned touching as a natural part of their interaction with students, although men teachers reduced eye contact and touching with female students to avoid suggestions of undue interest. Teachers described their own flirtatious behavior as well as their parental feelings toward students. Research into affectionate relationships between teachers and students, or affectionate research, should be accomplished through longitudinal studies by dedicated, caring researchers. (FG)

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The Affectionate Relationships of Fifth Year Teachers and Their Secondary Students

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The Affectionate Relationships of Fifth Year Teachers and Their Secondary Students

In 1981 Will and Ariel Durant died--she, first, at the age of 83; he, four weeks later, at 96. Theirs had been an amazing union, for in the nearly seventy years of their marriage they had written the incredible eleven volumes of The Story of Civilization. I begin with them and their passing here, not just because of my admiration for their work, but because they represent a too-little-discussed aspect of the high school teacher's life--an aspect that I believe deserves to be studied and then discussed openly. For as you remember, Ariel, at age 15, married Will Durant, a man not only 13 years her senior, but also her high school teacher. I do not remember reading any serious work that ever accused Will Durant of having acted in an unprofessional or unsavory way in marrying his own student, but I can imagine that it was a topic of no small concern to the principal, parents, students, and other teachers in the high school where he taught and Ariel was a student.

This concern has not changed. Recently a series of three letters appeared in the "Dear Abby" column. The first letter was from a high school teacher who was concerned about his overwhelming attraction to a 15-year-old student. Abby essentially told him he was immature and should grow up and be professional. A bit later, a second letter appeared from a married woman who told of her happy, successful marriage to, you guessed it, her high school teacher. Abby's response--"there's always another viewpoint." The third letter came from a man who applauded Abby's reply to the first letter saying:

It is dangerous and unethical for teachers to become romantically involved with their students, who are usually naive children in a very confused period of their lives. The fact that occasionaly these involvements produce long-lived relationships does not excuse the lack of ethics inherent in such conduct. Don't back down, Abby. You were right the first time.

Tom Smith (My real name)

(In the Seattle Times, Jan. 3, 1982)

Now, you may wonder if I am here to suggest that we should abandon such thinking about romance and ethics because it's archaic or because Will and Ariel Durant were so wonderful together. (You may even wonder what any of this has to do with fifth year teachers.) But I write here to broach the wider topic of the high school teacher's personal relationships with students (of which romantic involvements are just one) and to ask why we read so little of them in studies of teaching and see so little of this crucial issue in materials prepared for preservice teachers?

I will quickly answer my own question by saying that I believe we see little on this topic not only because it is an uncomfortable issue, but also because finding out how teachers relate personally to their students so that we can talk wisely about it requires researchers to have personal relationships with the teachers from whom we seek highly guarded personal information. This personal relationship of researcher and teacher takes time (maybe even five years)--time that is hard to find and even harder to justify for today's researcher.

Let me go back now and look first at the issue of the personal relationships of teachers and students, then return to questions of research approaches later.

The Five Year Study

During the course of a five-year study I carried out on beginning secondary teachers, I became intrigued with their relationships with high school students--especially those in which there were very positive or very negative feelings expressed. Concern or caring are the terms used to describe the professionalized element of relationships, but I am talking here about real affection and hostility. Teachers who have reached their fifth year are both old enough to be somewhat objective about their past and current relationships with students, and close enough in memory to those early years to recall specific experiences. Then, too, they find themselves in a changing age relationship with their students. Once relatively close in age, they are now nine, ten or more years older than their oldest students.

I found during the study that most teachers would talk spontaneously to me, an outsider, about students whom they disliked or to whom they were hostile, and about students who disliked them or were hostile to them. (The feelings are often mutual.) Now, strong hostility or dislike is not actually an emotion that is sanctioned among teachers and students because it is contrary to the loving, giving, caring, helping image schools are supposed to carry. But somehow teachers can admit, now and then, that,

indeed, in a weak moment they actually disliked a particular student. It may be that disliked students constitute a professional 'problem' and, therefore, can be acknowledged as such, so that the 'problem' can be solved and everyone will like everyone else. This is, of course, silly for there are some people whom, try as you might, you may never like (and who may do such despicable things that they deserve your response). Likewise, there are students who will never like you, regardless of all you may do to change their feelings (and you may or may not have done some despicable thing to deserve their contempt).

Dealing with students who do not like you or vice versa is a very important topic for preservice and inservice teachers alike. We could, no doubt, all use a refresher course on this, for colleges are also not lacking in "unharmonious student-teacher dyads."

But the point that came to be increasingly clear to me as I talked with the eleven high school teachers in my study, was that they rarely or never talked with equal spontaneity about their feelings of affection (of any degree) for particular students or similar affection for them shown by specific students. This seemed to be almost a taboo subject, even though one could hardly believe there was no affection. So I came in the fifth year of my study, and the fifth year of teaching for the remaining teachers (who now numbered only nine)--to ask directly about their liking of students.

I asked the teachers how they related to male students, to female students, and whether they used any special techniques for dealing with

students of either sex. I asked, then, if they were attracted to certain students; if they ever found themselves being flirtatious with a student; if so, why; if now, why not. And finally, I asked about any experiences they had had with students "getting a crush" on them. What had they done? How did they feel?

I am no longer surprised by the diversity of responses that can come from a small group of teachers. Certainly, the responses to these questions varied as much as the responses to any question I had asked in earlier years. Time and space do not permit a thorough presentation of my findings and analysis. I will merely highlight three issues here. They are touching, flirting, and parenting.

The Teachers' Touch

Touching is an extremely critical behavior in the teachers' descriptions of their positive relationships with students. The teachers varied in the amount of touching they reported for themselves, all the way from "I'm a hugger" to virtually no physical contact. Most, however, did not eliminate touching--hugs, arms around shoulders, pats--from their behavior, contrary to the admonitions of some teacher educators. The teachers mentioned these gestures as a rather natural part of their interaction with students.

There was some agreement among the men that touching was riskier with older female students because it might be interpreted as suggestive. In

fact, the men seemed to agree that older female students were more dangerous and taboo because "they might take your attention seriously." Eye contact and touching were reportedly reduced by one teacher to avoid any suggestion of undue interest in older female students. The men, too, were uncomfortable about being alone with a female student. They sometimes mentioned the history of problems for teachers under that condition. In contrast, the women teachers mentioned no need to alter touching behavior or eye contact with older male students.

Touching, while open to many interpretations, can certainly be construed as flirtatious in certain contexts. In addition, some of the teachers mentioned joking, increased smiling and eye contact, complimenting, and "added attention" as sometimes constituting flirtatious behavior. One male and one female teacher said they consciously avoided flirtatious behavior with students of any age. At another point on the continuum were those who admitted that they flirted and that it was 'fun' and 'healthy' as long as it didn't 'harm people.' A third group claimed not only that they enjoyed flirting, but that they <u>used</u> it as a kind of motivating technique to get better work from the students. This may alarm some but, of course, flirting is a timeless tool for getting people to do what we want and we should not be surprised that some teachers do it, are observant enough to notice, and honest enough to admit it.

Teacher as Parent

At the same time that some of the teachers described their flirtatious behavior with certain students they often described their parental feelings for others--a desire to protect, to mother, or to be a father image. The behavioral differences between this parenting and flirtation were not always clear. That is, the teachers did not explain what they did to be parental rather than flirtatious. Indeed, the differences are apparently not always clear to students either for, by the teachers' reports, it is most likely to be the students toward whom they feel parental who come to "have a crush" on the teacher. These students are described as "a little bit silly, a little immature," and sometimes as being less popular. They are not the physically, mentally, and socially mature students whom the teachers described as having been the most attractive.

The teachers are often both embarrassed and flattered by the attention of the student who has the crush on them. Some are alarmed and some in dread when they recognize the truth. Some report handling the situation well and others admit "I didn't handle it right, I suppose . . . but I didn't know how." This admission of ignorance brings me back to the question I raised earlier about the tyranny of silence imposed on the whole realm of affection in teaching. The only dictum that appears to have emanated from teacher educators is "Don't touch!"--a declaration that is patently foolish and inhuman.

Affectionate Research

Those who offer simple rules to high school teachers, whether in print or in lecture, cannot bear total responsibility for the simple silence surrounding affection. What have we given them in the way of research to aid in its understanding? Precious little, I would say. This stony silence about teacher-student affection and the lack of recognition of diversity in relationships is likely to continue unless we study it carefully and choose study methods that draw us close to the subjective experiences of the teachers. We must feel and then make known our liking for those teachers, so that they may like and trust us enough to reveal their thoughts, their problems, and their failures in student-teacher relationships--in short, their humanness. I would call this affectionate research.

A survey instrument will certainly not give us anything like this, but neither will short term naturalistic observations in classrooms, nor brief, one-time interviews, nor a series of interviews carried out by different people, nor even diaries kept for a few months. These data-gathering methods in and of themselves are not inappropriate, but they are all marked by a brevity of encounter between researcher and teacher. This brevity decreases the revelatory power of any method used to understand complex human experience. Plainly, people are just not likely to reveal the most important aspects of their experience as teachers to a total stranger.

So, in a somewhat circuitous fashion, I come to put in my plea for the support of a certain kind of longitudinal study on this topic of student-

teacher relationships and on others of a similar nature. Such long term study must be carried out by persons who initiate and then continue contact with participants over a period of months and years. Only this way can a sufficient base of mutual liking and trust be built to allow the protective veils of vagueness, abstraction, and omission to be dropped around the personal, the painful, or the taboo, and subsequently crucial experiences, of being a teachers.

The effect of long-term commitment by a researcher to a group of teachers is not without its attendant dilemmas, of course. While enriching the data from the participants, one may also be losing one's objectivity. But the value of objectivity in research is quite overrated, indeed, some say even an impossible ideal. So if I must choose between uncommitted, uninvolved, objective data gathering that results in shallow vagueries on the one hand and committed, subjective, but patient elicitation that results in deep insights on the other--the choice, for me, is easy.

As we study the teachers with whose lives we are concerned, we may find our Will Durants and we may find his female counterparts. We may find the mother figures, and we may find the father figures. But we will not really understand any of them and we will not be able to share that understanding, unless we take the time for affectionate research.

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